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SPEECH

OF THE

HON. JAMES A. GARFIELD,

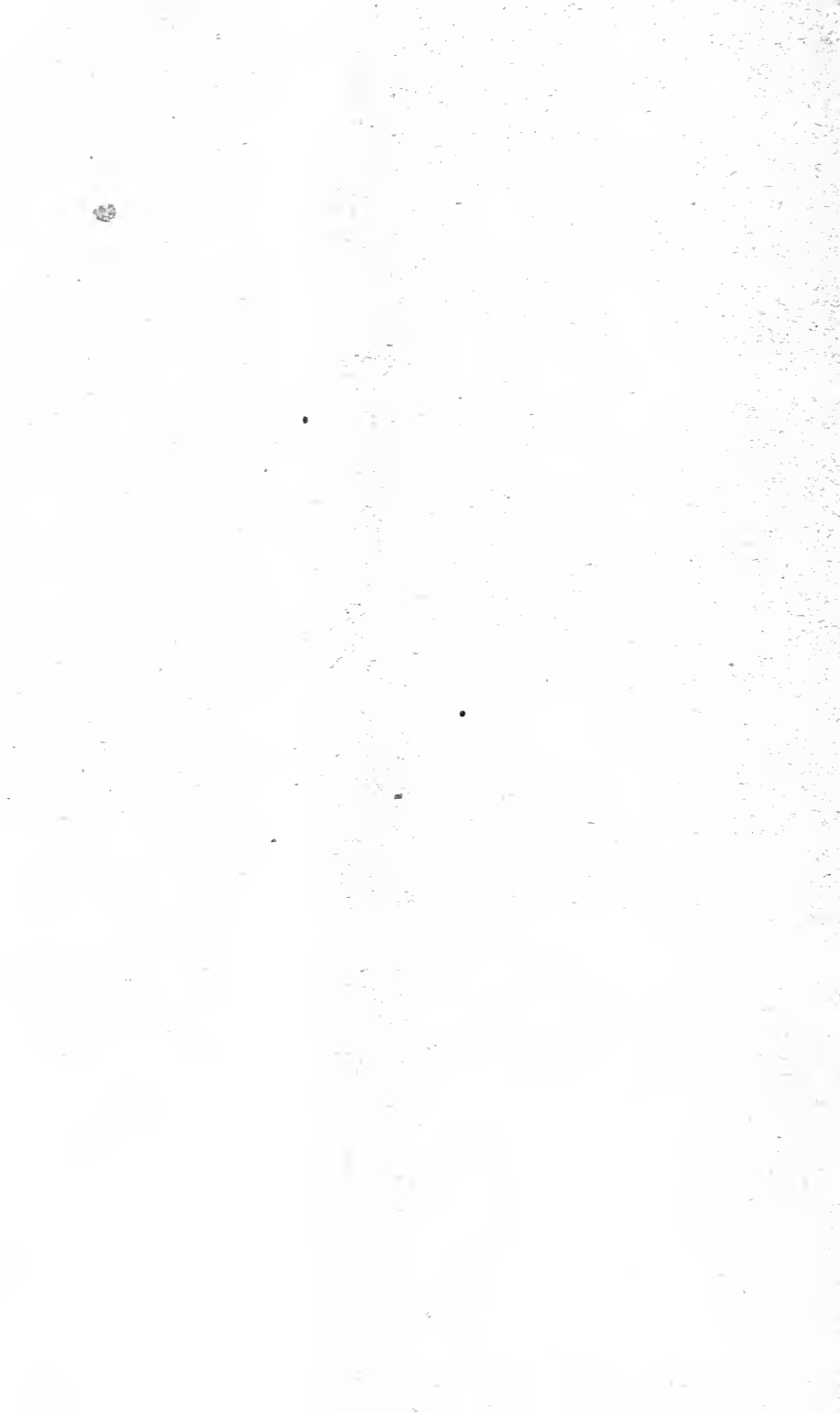
OF OHIO,

Delivered in the House of Representatives, February 12th, 1878.

WASHINGTON, D. C. :

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Carpenter's Painting—Lincoln and Emancipation.

On the 16th of January, 1878, Mr. GARFIELD introduced into the House of Representatives the following Joint Resolution, which was adopted without a division. It was subsequently adopted by the Senate, and was approved by the President February 1st, 1878:

Whereas Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson, of New York City, has tendered to Congress Carpenter's Painting of President Lincoln and his Cabinet, at the time of his first reading of the Proclamation of Emancipation: Therefore,

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That said painting is hereby accepted in the name of the people of the United States; and the thanks of Congress are tendered to the donor for her generous and patriotic gift.

And be it further resolved, That the Joint Committee on the Library are hereby instructed to make arrangements for the formal presentation of said painting to Congress, on Tuesday, the twelfth of February next; and said committee shall cause said painting to be placed in an appropriate and conspicuous place in the Capitol, and shall carefully provide for its preservation.

And be it further resolved, That the President is requested to cause a copy of these Resolutions to be forwarded to Mrs. Thompson.

In pursuance of its provisions, the hour of two o'clock p. m., Tuesday, February 12th, was fixed for the formal presentation and acceptance of the painting.

At two o'clock the Assistant Doorkeeper announced the Senate of the United States. Preceded by the Vice President of the United States and accompanied by their Secretary and Sergeant-at-Arms, the Senators entered and took the seats assigned them. The donor of the picture, Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson, with her escort, and the artist, Mr. F. B. Carpenter, also occupied seats on the floor.

The VICE PRESIDENT (who occupied a chair on the right of the Senate) said: The Senate and House of Representatives have convened in joint session for the purpose of receiving, through the munificence of Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson, of New York, Carpenter's painting, The Signing of the Proclamation of Emancipation.

Mr. GARFIELD said:

Mr. PRESIDENT: By the order of the Senate and the House, and on behalf of the donor, Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson, it is made my pleasant duty to deliver to Congress the painting which is now unveiled. It is the patriotic gift of an American woman whose years have been devoted to gentle and generous charities and to the instruction and elevation of the laboring poor.

Believing that the perpetuity and glory of her country depend upon the dignity of labor and the equal freedom of all its people, she has come to the Capitol, to place in the perpetual custody of the nation, as the symbol of her faith, the representation of that great act which proclaimed "liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Inspired by the same sentiment, the Representatives of the nation have opened the doors of this Chamber to receive at her hands the sacred trust. In coming hither, these living Representatives have passed under the dome and through that beautiful and venerable Hall which, on another occasion, I have ventured to call the third House of American Representatives, that silent assembly whose members have received their high credentials at the impartial hand of History. Year by year, we see the circle of its immortal membership enlarging; year by year, we see the elect of their country, in eloquent silence, taking

their places in this American Pantheon, bringing within its sacred precincts the wealth of those immortal memories which made their lives illustrious ; and year by year, that august assembly is teaching deeper and grander lessons to those who serve in these more ephemeral Houses of Congress.

Among the paintings hitherto assigned to places within the Capitol, are two which mark events forever memorable in the history of mankind ; thrice memorable in the history of America.

The first is the painting by Vanderlyn, which represents, though with inadequate force, the great discovery which gave to the civilized world a new hemisphere.

The second, by Trumbull, represents that great Declaration which banished forever from our shores the crown and scepter of Imperial Power, and proposed to found a new nation upon the broad and enduring basis of liberty.

To-day, we place upon our walls, this votive tablet, which commemorates the third great act in the history of America—the fulfillment of the promises of the Declaration.

Concerning the causes which led to that act, the motives which inspired it, the necessities which compelled it, and the consequences which followed and are yet to follow it, there have been, there are, and still will be great and honest differences of opinion. Perhaps we are yet too near the great events of which this act formed so conspicuous a part, to understand its deep significance and to foresee its far-off consequences.

The lesson of history is rarely learned by the actors themselves, especially when they read it by the fierce and dusky light of war, or amid the deeper shadows of those sorrows which war brings to both. But the unanimous voice of this House in favor of accepting the gift, and the impressive scene we here witness, bear eloquent testimony to the transcendent importance of the event portrayed on yonder canvas.

Let us pause to consider the actors in that scene. In force of character, in thoroughness and breadth of culture, in experience of public affairs and in national reputation, the Cabinet that sat around that council-board has had no superior, perhaps no equal in our history. Seward, the finished scholar, the consummate orator, the great leader of the Senate, had come to crown his career with those achievements which placed him in the first rank of modern diplomatists. Chase, with a culture and a fame of massive grandeur, stood as the rock and pillar of the public credit, the noble embodiment of the public faith. Stanton was there, a very Titan of strength, the great organizer of victory. Eminent lawyers, men of business, leaders of States and leaders of men completed the group.

But the man who presided over that council, who inspired and guided its deliberations, was a character so unique that he stood alone, without a model in history or a parallel among men. Born on this day,

sixty-nine years ago, to an inheritance of extremest poverty; surrounded by the rude forces of the wilderness; wholly unaided by parents; only one year in any school; never, for a day, master of his own time until he reached his majority; making his way to the profession of the law by the hardest and roughest road; yet by force of unconquerable will and persistent, patient work, he attained a foremost place in his profession,

And, moving up from high to higher,
Became, on fortune's crowning slope,
The pillar of a people's hope,
The center of a world's desire.

At first, it was the prevailing belief that he would be only the nominal head of his administration; that its policy would be directed by the eminent statesmen he had called to his council. How erroneous this opinion was, may be seen from a single incident:

Among the earliest, most difficult, and most delicate duties of his administration, was the adjustment of our relations with Great Britain. Serious complications, even hostilities were apprehended. On the 21st of May, 1861, the Secretary of State presented to the President his draught of a letter of instructions to Minister Adams, in which the position of the United States and the attitude of Great Britain were set forth with the clearness and force which long experience and great ability had placed at the command of the Secretary.

Upon almost every page of that original draught are erasures, additions, and marginal notes in the handwriting of Abraham Lincoln, which exhibit a sagacity, a breadth of wisdom, and a comprehension of the whole subject, impossible to be found except in a man of the very first order. And these modifications of a great state paper were made by a man who, but three months before, had entered, for the first time, the wide theater of Executive action.

Gifted with an insight and a foresight which the ancients would have called divination, he saw, in the midst of darkness and obscurity, the logic of events, and forecasted the result. From the first, in his own quaint, original way, without ostentation or offense to his associates, he was pilot and commander of his administration. He was one of the few great rulers whose wisdom increased with his power, and whose spirit grew gentler and tenderer as his triumphs were multiplied.

This was the man, and these his associates, who look down upon us from the canvas.

The present is not a fitting occasion to examine, with any completeness, the causes that led to the proclamation of emancipation; but the peculiar relation of that act to the character of Abraham Lincoln cannot be understood, without considering one remarkable fact in his history.

His earlier years were passed in a region remote from the centers of political thought, and without access to the great world of books. But the few books that came within his reach he devoured

with the divine hunger of genius. One paper, above all others, led him captive and filled his spirit with the majesty of its truth and the sublimity of its eloquence. It was the Declaration of American Independence. The author and signers of that instrument became, in his early youth, the heroes of his political worship.

I doubt if history affords any example of a life so early, so deeply, and so permanently influenced, by a single political truth, as was Abraham Lincoln's by the central doctrine of the Declaration—the liberty and equality of all men. Long before his fame had become national he said :

That is the electric cord in the Declaration, that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, and that will link such hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.

That truth runs, like a thread of gold, through the whole web of his political life. It was the spear-point of his logic, in his debates with Douglas. It was the inspiring theme of his remarkable speech at the Cooper Institute which gave him the nomination to the Presidency. It filled him with reverent awe when, on his way to the Capital to enter the shadows of the terrible conflict then impending, he uttered, in Carpenter's Hall, at Philadelphia, these remarkable words, which were prophecy then, but are history now :

I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. I have often pondered over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and framed and adopted that Declaration. I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army who achieved that independence. I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land, but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but I hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that, in due time, the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men. This is the sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Now, my friends, can this country be saved on that basis? If it can, I shall consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help to save it. If it cannot be saved upon that principle it will be truly awful. But if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I was about to say *I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it.*

Deep and strong was his devotion to liberty ; yet deeper and stronger still was his devotion to the Union ; for he believed that without the Union, permanent liberty for either race on this continent would be impossible. And because of this belief, he was reluctant, perhaps more reluctant than most of his associates, to strike slavery with the sword. For many months, the passionate appeals of millions of his associates seemed not to move him. He listened to all the phases of the discussion, and stated, in language clearer and stronger than any opponent had used, the dangers, the difficulties and the possible futility of the act.

In reference to its practical wisdom, Congress, the Cabinet and the country were divided. Several of his generals had proclaimed the freedom of slaves within the limits of their commands. The President revoked their proclamations. His first Secretary of War had inserted a paragraph in his annual report advocating a similar policy. The President suppressed it.

On the 19th of August, 1862, Horace Greeley published a letter, addressed to the President, entitled "The prayer of Twenty Millions," in which he said :

On the face of this wide earth, Mr. President, there is not one disinterested, determined, intelligent champion of the Union cause who does not feel that all attempts to put down the rebellion and at the same time uphold its inciting cause are preposterous and futile.

To this the President responded in that ever-memorable dispatch of August 22, in which he said :

If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them.

If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them.

My paramount object is to save the Union, and not either to save or destroy slavery.

If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it. If I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

What I do about slavery and the colored race I do because I believe it helps to save the Union, and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it helps to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe that what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I believe doing more will help the cause.

Thus, against all importunities on the one hand and remonstrances on the other, he took the mighty question to his own heart, and, during the long months of that terrible battle-summer, wrestled with it alone.

But at length he realized the saving truth, that great, unsettled questions have no pity for the repose of nations.

On the 22d of September, he summoned his Cabinet to announce his conclusion. It was my good fortune, on that same day, and a few hours after the meeting, to hear from the lips of one who participated, the story of the scene.

As the Chiefs of the Executive Departments came in, one by one, they found the President reading a favorite chapter from a popular humorist. He was lightening the weight of the great burden which rested upon his spirit. He finished the chapter, reading it aloud. And here I quote, from the published journal of the late Chief-Justice, an entry, written immediately after the meeting, and bearing unmistakable evidence that it is almost a literal transcript of Lincoln's words :

The President then took a graver tone and said : "Gentlemen, I have, as you are aware, thought a great deal about the relation of this war to slavery ; and you all remember that, several weeks ago, I read to you an order I had prepared upon the subject, which, on account of objections made by some of you, was not issued. Ever since then my mind has been much occupied with this subject, and I have thought all along that the time for acting on it might probably come. I think the time has come now. I wish it was a better time. I wish that we were in a better condition. The action of the army against the rebels has not been quite what I should have best liked, but they have been driven out of Maryland, and Pennsylvania is no longer in danger of invasion.

"When the rebel army was at Frederick, I determined as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a proclamation of emancipation, such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to any one, but I made a promise to myself and (hesitating a little) to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise. I have got you together to hear what I have written down. I do not wish your advice about the main matter, for that I have determined for myself. This I say without intending anything but respect for any one of you. But I already know the views of each on this question. They have been heretofore expressed, and I have considered them as thoroughly and carefully as I can. What I have written is that which my reflections have determined me to say. If there is anything in the expressions I use, or in any minor matter which any one of you think had best be changed, I shall be glad to receive your suggestions. One other observation I

will make. I know very well that many others might, in this matter as in others, do better than I can; and if I was satisfied that the public confidence was more fully possessed by any one of them than by me, and knew of any constitutional way in which he could be put in my place, he should have it. I would gladly yield to him. But though I believe I have not so much of the confidence of the people as I had some time since, I do not know that, all things considered, any other person has more; and, however this may be, there is no way in which I can have any other man put where I am. I am here; I must do the best I can and bear the responsibility of taking the course which I feel I ought to take."

The President then proceeded to read his emancipation proclamation, making remarks on the several parts as he went on, and showing that he had fully considered the subject in all the lights under which it had been presented to him.

The proclamation was amended in a few matters of detail. It was signed and published that day. The world knows the rest, and will not forget it till "the last syllable of recorded time."

In the Painting before us, the artist has chosen the moment when the reading of the proclamation was finished, and the Secretary of State was offering his first suggestion. I profess no skill in the subtle mysteries of art criticism. I can only say of a painting what the painting says to me. I know not what this may say to others; but to me it tells the whole story of the scene in the silent and pathetic language of art.

We value the Trumbull picture of the Declaration—that promise and prophecy of which this act was the fulfillment—because many of its portraits were taken from actual life. This picture is a faithful reproduction not only of the scene but its accessories. It was painted at the Executive Mansion, under the eye of Mr. Lincoln, who sat with the artist during many days of genial companionship, and aided him in arranging the many details of the picture.

The severely plain chamber, not now used for Cabinet councils; the plain marble mantel, with the portrait of a hero President above it; the council table at which Jackson and his successor had presided; the old-fashioned chairs; the books and maps; the captured sword, with its pathetic history; all are there, as they were, in fact, fifteen years ago. But what is of more consequence, the portraits are true to the life. Mr. Seward said of the painting, "It is a vivid representation of the scene, with portraits of rare fidelity;" and so said all his associates.

Without this painting, the scene could not even now be reproduced. The room has been remodeled; its furniture is gone; and Death has been sitting in that council, calling the roll of its members in quick succession. Yesterday he added another name to his fatal list; and to-day he has left upon the earth but a single witness of the signing of the proclamation of emancipation.

With reverence and patriotic love, the artist accomplished his work; with patriotic love and reverent faith, the donor presents it to the nation. In the spirit of both, let the reunited nation receive it and cherish it forever. [Applause on the floor and in the galleries.]



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